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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000998

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SOCI KPAO VM
SUBJECT: THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN HCMC

REF: (A) HCMC 978 (B) HCMC 988 (C) HANOI 1238

HO CHI MIN 00000998 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Fairfax, Consul General, EXEC, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Over two hundred professors, students, reporters, business leaders, and local officials gathered in a ballroom festooned with red white and blue balloons and featuring jumbo-sized televisions for the first large-scale election event to be held in post-war HCMC. While we did not take a poll, it was fairly clear that Barack Obama was the audience's favorite, partly due to his appeal to younger Vietnamese. Even those who favored McCain as the candidate with a proven record of friendly policies toward Vietnam seemed genuinely excited by the historic implications of an African-American president. Their main concern was whether President Obama would be as friendly toward Vietnam and Senator John McCain has shown himself to be. While the event came off without a hitch, less than 24 hours earlier we received fresh warnings that it could be cancelled, curtailed or otherwise obstructed at the last minute as a result of sensitivities on the part of the leadership of the CPV of HCMC. Direct instructions from the MFA in Hanoi granting permission for reporters to attend appear to have ended internal wrangling in HCMC over whether or not the CPV should ban participation by anyone associated with the government, which would have included all reporters. END SUMMARY.

A SUCCESSFUL CELEBRATION OF DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

¶2. (SBU) On the morning of November 5 (election evening in the USA), ConGen HCMC hosted its first ever large-scale celebration of an American Presidential Election. Luck was with us on the timing, since our 8:00 AM - noon event started as the first poll results were being announced on the East Coast and wrapped up just after John McCain and Barack Obama made their respective speeches. The event, which featured live CNN coverage on two fifteen-foot screens plus computers that allowed guests to check on individual races via American news sites, was held in a large convention hall decorated with red white and blue balloons and bunting. Turnout was good. Students and educators were the largest single group, but we also hosted Vietnamese business leaders and numerous public officials. While top-level officials did not attend, Deputy Chief of Staff of the HCMC People's Committee (Mayor's office) Tri was there, as was Deputy Chairman of the People's Council (City Council) Khoa, the Deputy Chief of the External Relations Office (ERO), the President of the HCMC Union of Friendship Organizations and many others. Our guest list also included a number of local Americans, including the heads of the Democrats and Republicans Abroad.

¶3. (SBU) Judging both from the event itself as well as from numerous conversations over the past few months, the demographics of Vietnamese attitudes toward the two candidates were not greatly dissimilar to those in the USA. While there were no "black and white" distinctions, older Vietnamese appeared more likely to favor John McCain while younger ones

more were likely to tilt toward Barak Obama. In an area where the average age is under 30, this translates to a considerable pro-Obama bias among ordinary citizens. College students and young professionals often viewed the candidacy of Barack Obama as an affirmation of the American dream -- a powerful motivator among a youthful population with great hopes for the future. (Note: Earlier in the campaign, Hillary Clinton had captured the imagination of many in HCMC. End Note.) John McCain's long connection to Vietnam certainly helped his popularity among all age groups; even Vietnamese war veterans who fought against American troops cited McCain's wartime experience here as well as his subsequent active role on Vietnam issues in the Senate as factors in his favor. Government officials and senior business leaders, many of whom have met John McCain and/or his senior staff and advisors, were also comfortable that he would continue the positive trend in U.S.-Vietnam relations. Even the pro-McCain crowd did not seem at all displeased with the election results and instead reacted favorably to the historic election of an African-American president. Their main lingering concern was whether President Obama would continue President Bush's four-year streak of top-level meetings with top GVN officials.

¶4. (C) While government officials and CPV members had been instructed to remain completely neutral when speaking about the election, many were nonetheless willing to quietly voice their preferences. ERO Deputy Chief Tu, for example, was a fervent Obama supporter, as was HCMC Friendship Union President Quoc (who has two adult children in Texas). HCMC People's Council Deputy Chairman Khoa expressed his admiration for both candidates but admitted a preference for Obama while HCMC People's Committee Deputy Chief of Staff Tri, the oldest city official there and a Viet Cong veteran, was a staunch McCain supporter. HCMC's Bar association also reflected this age divide, with one young Bar Association vice president firmly in the Obama camp while a much older member (the only lawyer to have practiced law in both pre-1975 Saigon and post-1975 HCMC) was firmly behind McCain. A representative from the Fatherland Front was sporting buttons for both candidates.

HO CHI MIN 00000998 002.2 OF 002

THE EVENT THAT ALMOST WASN'T

¶5. (C) While election events have been hosted by the Embassy since the days of Pete Peterson, no large-scale event was held in HCMC before (although PAO's had invited small groups of students to the office to watch election returns there). When post first began preparing for this event in mid-summer, we were warned by the ERO that American elections are too "politically sensitive" in HCMC and that any such event would have to be held in an American venue, such as an American-owned hotel, with invitations limited to American businessmen plus a few protocol invitations in order to avoid being cancelled. As noted ref A, subsequent efforts to organize election-related speaking events at universities also ran into difficulties due to "political sensitivities." The American Chamber of Commerce declined to participate, explaining that they had been warned from their founding that they must remain strictly non-political (as opposed to more usual non-partisan).

¶6. (C) Despite these obstacles, post opted to push forward with a large-scale event for hundreds of primarily Vietnamese guests which we organized under the fig-leaf label of a private reception hosted by the CG. As late as November 4, we continued to encounter the "schizophrenia" described in ref A. The first call we received Tuesday morning was a clear push-back: an ERO official wanted to know the exact number of Vietnamese and American invitees. When CG asked why, he explained that the request came from the CPV of HCMC, which has the authority to forbid reporters and editors, as well as other government employees, from attending foreign-sponsored events and that the party leadership had not yet decided whether to ban attendance or not. An American event is OK; a Vietnamese event is not. (Comment: We suspect that this request originated with Deputy Party Secretary Dua -- see ref B.) Less than an hour later,

however, a different ERO official called with a second request for information on the American/Vietnamese ratio, this time explaining that several officials from City Hall were interested in attending but that they would feel uncomfortable if it were primarily an American-only event. When informed that most invitees were Vietnamese, the officials requested that extra invitations be sent to City Hall.

¶17. (C) In the end, local divisions over whether our election event should be supported or banned were superceded by direct instructions from the MFA in Hanoi, which issued a notice to all domestic media governing coverage of the election. (We received a copy from the pro-reform paper, Tuoi Tre.) The notice instructed all reporters and news outlets to:

- stay objective in reporting and supply limited commentary from local media;
- clearly cite the source of any foreign commentary or news account quoted in articles;
- avoid all criticism of the loser when reporting the election results.

The last line of the notice proved crucial for our event; it clearly stated that if the American Embassy/Consulate invited reporters to watch TV coverage of the election, the reporters may attend and collect information as usual. Thanks to the MFA, we had excellent coverage (TV as well as print media) and many government employees attended.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) The "political sensitivities" cited by local officials could be linked to the perception reported ref C that the CG spends too much time focusing on human rights and democracy. As noted in ref A, however, the public diplomacy environment in HCMC has always been very restrictive -- thus the lack of election events in the past -- and our issues with the Consular District are as old as the Consulate General itself. To keep sensitivities to a minimum, during numerous press interviews, CG was careful to always refer to the event as a cultural event providing an opportunity for Vietnamese to learn more about the USA. The personal reactions from many contacts -- including CPV members -- showed that they warmly welcomed the event and hoped for more such outreach in the future.

¶19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX